Joel Selvin

Sly and the Family Stone: An Oral History

January 9, 2023

Host: Stu Levitan

Stu Levitan Hello again, friends, and welcome to Madison Book Beat, your listener-sponsored community radio home for Madison authors, topics, book events, and publishers. I'm your host, Stu Levitan.

Our guest today is the award-winning journalist, music critic, and author Joel Selvin, for a conversation about his classic book, Sly and the Family Stone: An Oral History, out of print for several years, but just reissued by the good people at Permuted Press. It's the story of the rise and fall of one of the most important figures in modern music, from his childhood as a musical prodigy to the end of the band in 1975. It's a tale told well by the people who were there: his parents, his bandmates, his ex-wife, his managers, his gangsters, even some members of the Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead, some who loved him, some who came to hate him, some who did both.

It's a story that Joel Selvin was exceptionally well qualified to uncover. Not only is he an award-winning journalist and music critic who has covered pop music for the San Francisco Chronicle for more than 35 years, and the author of close to 20 best-selling books about the Grateful Dead, the Rolling Stones, Ricky Nelson, Haight-Ashbury, and more. He is also a native of Berkeley, California, and was in his early teens as Sly was making a name for himself as a hip disc jockey on San Francisco radio. And he also remembers everything about the first time he heard Sly's seminal song, "Dance to the Music," as a 17-year-old in late 1967. And he is a great raconteur.

As to the requisite Madison connection, well, I guess that's through me, because this is the fourth time around for Joel on my show, following conversations about his books:

- *Altamont, the Rolling Stones, the Hells Angels, and the inside story of rock's darkest day.*
- *Here Comes the Night, the dark soul of Burt Burns and the dirty business of rhythm and blues.*
- *Hollywood Eden, electric guitars, fast cars, and the myth of the California paradise.*

It is a pleasure to welcome back to Madison BookBeat, Joel Selvin.

Joel Selvin Great to be back, Stu.

So what do you remember about that first time you heard "Dance to the Music" in the fall of 1967?

It's vividly impressed in my brain. It's a Saturday morning. It's a sunny Saturday morning, and I'm driving over to Berkeley down the East Shore Freeway past Aquatic Park. And I've dialed in KDIA, which is the big R&B AM radio station. And lo and behold, Sly Stone is on the air. Now, he had been a KDIA disc jockey up until maybe six months or a year before. So we hadn't heard him on the air in a while. He'd been off with his band. They'd had a couple of albums out. And so that was sort of like, oh, wow, Sly's back on the air.

And as I'm driving down Aquatic Park, he says that he's going to drop the needle on the band's new record. And up came those voices. Boom, boom, you know. And ah. Let's do the music. Let's do the music. Just everything changed inside my mind. Just the door opened, and there was a portal to a new world of music. And I'm not alone in that. I mean, that was how Sly's music affected people. It was so beyond what had been imagined up to that point.

And it collected a bunch of ideas that were all in the ether at the time and converged them on each other in such an impactful way, it changed how white people looked at black music. It changed how black people looked at white music. It changed how black people looked at black music. Sly's music was fundamentally revolutionary. The Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, the whole Motown gang, there would have been no "Papa Was a Rolling Stone" if it wasn't for Sly. But also, Miles Davis was enormously affected by Sly's music. Herbie Hancock made the biggest selling jazz album in history, *Headhunters*. And on there is a track called "Sly," and it's not an accident. *Headhunters* was completely inspired by Herbie Hancock's understanding of Sly's music. So it's a pivot point in 20th century American music.

You mentioned Miles Davis. There's even some Miles Davis in the book. Not a particularly productive collaboration between Sly and Miles. And apparently there are times that Sly did not appreciate Miles playing that voodoo music on his organ. But has Sly gotten the due he deserves?

Oh, I don't think so. You know, if Sly had died in 1971, like a Jim Morrison or a Janis Joplin, all the greatness and his triumphs and his glory would have been sort of hermetically sealed. But instead, we all lived with this really long, slow, public decline. This arrest, this not showing up for, this, that. I mean, he wound up a fugitive from justice living on the lam for like 18 months. And then, you know, when he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 91, nobody in the band had seen him in years, in years. He'd just disappeared off the earth. So no, he put his own reputation into decline and undermined it and continued to undermine it and undermine it. The comeback gigs did nothing to reverse that. If anything, they just dug him into a deeper hole, the Grammy Award thing and the Coachella appearance. So no, his reputation has not been well tended to.

You were in your late teens when the band was at its peak. Did you see him live?

Sure. Sure, they were amazing. I saw him once before Woodstock and they were just electrifying. They were fast and tight and full of jive and powerful. And then after Woodstock, they were completely transformed into this kind of messianic event machine. You know, they weren't concerts. Each one was an event. And it included that if he was going to show, you were going to wait because he wasn't going to be there on time for sure. And I spent a couple of nights of waiting, a couple, three hours for him to take the stage along with, you know, everybody else at Pepperland or Winterland. Winterland, he came out after like having everybody sit there for two and a half hours and then lectured them on how San Francisco wasn't cool anymore. You know, he was crazed. He was off on a power trip. He was lost in his own ego. And he was ruthless and reckless in his exercise of that.

I want to get to some of the downfall in a second because it really is profound. But in terms of Sly on the way up, he was something of a musical prodigy. He could play several instruments even before he was in his teens. Was he a great musician or was it that he created great music through the band he assembled?

Well, all of the above. You know, I don't think Sly Stone played guitar solos along the lines of a Joe Pass or an Eric Clapton or anything, but he could handle a guitar as well as anybody needed to. And at a very early age, his gifts were abundantly apparent.

He starts out in a doo-wop group, which interestingly enough is boys and girls, blacks and whites, or at least one black, him. And the Viscounts had a sort of regional hit. He came to the attention of the Top 40 disc jockey, Tom Donahue. And Donahue recognized something in Sly. And this young Sly, I've talked to many people that remember him from that period. He was an incredibly bright, shiny young thing. And Donahue put him to work writing and producing Bobby Freeman, who was San Francisco's first rock and roll star. He had Do You Want to Dance in 1957, I think. And they concocted a dance song, a sort of contrived dance song of the day called Do the Swim, Come On and Swim, which would have been a massive hit on a bigger label. As it was, it was top five. And Sly made enough money at age 19 to be able to buy a house for his parents and his father could quit the janitor business. So that was where he began with that Bobby Freeman. The next thing he did was produced records for Donahue's labels by the Beau Brummels, who were kind of a Beatles-type band. Again, Laugh Laugh would have been a number one record on any other label. Brilliantly produced, brilliantly conceived. You ask the Bo Brummels about working with Sly and they just go on about how brilliant he was, how energetic, how productive, how supportive, how collaborative, just an amazing young guy.

And that's the guy who launched into the disc jockey world and started putting his band together in his spare time. And Sly and the Family Stone was a strategically conceived outfit that was a bunch of ideas that Sly had that he wanted to put into place because he wasn't really like idiomatically confined. He was a very interesting disc jockey who played the routine R&B stuff of the day, Motown and James Brown and that. But he mixed in Beatles album tracks, Dylan. He stole a lot of patter from Lord Buckley. So he was like this super hip guy who like paled around with Billy Preston from Ray Charles' band and aspired to the kind of young hip Prince of the City thing that was what 1964 and 1965 were all about for rock and roll.

And that's the guy who put together this band, Sly and the Family Stone, very cunningly, very strategically, black, white, boy, girl, message music that matched the sort of tenor of the times. No, he knew exactly what he was doing.

And how important was it that of all the musicians, the drummer be white?

So that's an inverted cliche because as little as rock and roll was integrated at that point, there was a certain acceptable thing to having a black drummer because, oh, blacks had natural rhythm, right? And so there was a lot of that out there where the band would be all white up front, but there'd be a brother on the set. And Sly wanted to invert that.

And in fact, Greg Rico was not the world's greatest drummer. And everybody in the band remembers the night in San Jose when Frosty, the drummer from Lee Michaels' band, sat in. And Frosty was incredible. He's a great drummer. And everybody was like blown out, and they thought Greg was not going to survive that. But Frosty stayed with Lee Michaels, and Greg kept the job. So Sly was willing to settle for a drummer who was like not exactly the quality he wanted.

And in fact, on a lot of the Sly records, that's him on drums. Greg and I sat down here in the record library one afternoon listening to There's a Riot Going On to just try and find where his drums were. That was his last record. He was the first guy to leave the band, and he was sort of disgusted by the whole thing anyway. It was all being put together piece by piece, overdub, overdub, overdub. And the drug thing had driven everybody crazy, and he saw mental health away from this. So he bailed on that.

But we went back and listened to the record, and it was like really hard to find where Greg played. We found some parts of his surviving on the nine-minute version of Thank You for Letting Me Be Myself Again that's on there. But otherwise, it's Sly on drums or the drum machine, Rhythm Ace, which was a very primitive early drum machine that Sly was enamored with.

And that's Family Affair was the hit single off that set. And that Family Affair is Sly, Rose, his sister singing, Billy Preston on organ, actually electric piano, excuse me, and the Rhythm Ace. That's all that is. There's no members of the band on that at all.

Both kids are good and well. Blood's thicker than the mud. It's a family affair. It's a family affair. It's a family affair. It's a family affair. Oh, no, man. Oh, man.

Where do Cynthia Robinson on trumpet and Jerry Martini on tenor stack up against Jim Price and Bobby Keys?

Well, Bobby Keys is an incredible soloist. And Jim Priceis super well-trained. You know, he could write those charts and write those arrangements. Jerry came out of an R&B group called George and Teddy, who were a fixture on San Francisco's Broadway nightlife scene, which was also where Sly sort of operated when he was doing the Bo Brumbles and like that. So everybody knew George and Teddy. They were a fixture at the Condor. And Jerry was their sort of showman sax player that they put up on the bar and let him walk down the bar while he played a solo.

Cynthia was somebody that Sly knew from high school in Sacramento. And she was in love with Sly from the moment she met him. I think he understood that Cynthia could play well enough to be part of this band, that she looked the part, and that he could control her easily. She fit into his world very easily. She was not a great trumpet player, but she wasn't horrible either. She was just fine. And all those guys were doing horn punches. I don't think there's any really great solo parts or elaborate arrangements there. It's pretty much just horn punches.

I think the second most interesting narrative arc in the book is the story of Larry Graham. Am I right that he's also the second most important musician in the band?

Larry is so interesting. Yeah, he collected his own little following. He was outside Sly's area, his radius. He was the bass player in a trio with his mother. And his mother worked all the time. She played piano like Errol Garner and sang like Dinah Washington, Del Graham. And Sly had a friend, a fan, who took him to see the Del Graham trio. And what he saw was Larry Graham's thumb popping, which nobody had ever played a bass like that before. Everybody played bass with their fingertips. But Larry had developed a way to pop the string with his thumb, and he could play it both ways, up and down. So instead of having a boom, boom, boom, boom, get up, pop, pop. And Sly immediately understood how revolutionary that was and incorporated that into his sound, which was kind of being drawn from sort of some of the Fillmore era bands without their lax musicianship. Yet at the same time, it emanated from a more traditional R&B world. And when he put that Larry Graham bass in it, he invented funk.

And you actually broke some news about Larry Graham's departure from the band, perhaps some details that Larry might not even have known at the time.

Yeah, Larry called up and asked me about it. Yeah, Larry was driven out of the band by the gangsters who were on PCP. They were looking to beat him up real bad. They did beat up a couple guys in the road crew and kidnapped one of their girlfriends. They just ran rampage over everything one night in Los Angeles. And in fact, Larry was snuck out of the hotel in the backseat of a car under a blanket with his girlfriend. So that's how Larry left Sly and the Family Stone, fearing for his life.

But were there details about that whole incident that he hadn't known about until he read in the book?

It was before the book came out. I conducted an interview with Larry early on, and it was pretty namby-pamby. And then as I learned more about what had really gone on and transpired, I reconnected with Larry and attempted a second interview, and he froze. He just couldn't handle it. And called back two or three nights later and wanted to know what I knew. He said that when you mentioned the Cavalier Motel, I think that you know something that I don't. You know, yeah, I did, because he got out of there before everything was clear. I mean, he just ran out of there fearing for his life. And I told him, I said, if he wondered if his life was in jeopardy, that yes, indeed, I'm under the impression that a gentleman who was known as Black, I have no idea what his real name was, had a gun in his pocket and he was planning on using it on Larry Graham, or at least that's what I was told.

So this is an essential book about a transformative musical figure that has lots of really important information in it. Why did it go out of print?

Oh, it was in print for a long, long time. And it never really, it developed what I laughingly call a cult audience. It was a part of a series of oral histories that were put out supposedly to sweep dusty corners clean of rock history. I think the initial offering was:

1. Sam and Dave
2. Sly and the Family Stone
3. Lynyrd Skynyrd
4. Black Sabbath

And there were a couple others, but then they just continued the series. And the series was very ugly. They had really uniform covers. The publisher told me, oh, they'll help sell each other. And I'm like, yeah, sure. Collect them all, kids. But I sort of overachieved talking to like 40-some-odd people and interviewing all these gangsters that had never told their stories before and unearthing so many of the lurid and tawdry details that the book kind of had an afterlife. You know, like Questlove came up to me at a party and introduced himself because he'd read my book, right? So it became kind of like my cred in the hood with the cognoscenti, with the people that had found it. And I had all these transcripts to these interviews that I'd done.

So when Jeff Kalas got a book deal to do a biography of Sly and the Family Stone, I loaned him the transcripts of, you know, essentially I researched this book for him. And you see this on and on, like the David Camp profile Sly in Vanity Fair during one of his big comebacks. And the first thing he's got to get out of the way is that there's this incredible oral history about Sly and the Family Stone by Joel Selvin. And really, I'm talking about my book like it's something that I did, right? And it's not. It's these people who I interviewed. It's an oral history. And they're so eloquent at telling their own story. It's so vivid. I couldn't have improved on it. And in fact, Mojo Magazine hired me to do a cover article about There's a Riot Going On and use the transcripts for the quotes. And I wrote my ass off, Stu, but it doesn't have the emotional immediacy of these people's first-person accounts of that. So I feel okay like taking credit for having edited and assembled it, but it's really their book. And those voices are what makes the book so real.

And that piece that is in the 2001 edition of Mojo Magazine on There's a Riot Going On, the magazine article is entitled Lucifer Rising. Was Sly Lucifer or was he really just a good kid playing bad and doing bad drugs and surrounding himself with bad people?

Yeah, David Caperlick, who was Sly's manager for quite a long time, had this whole theory about the two Sly's, Sly Stone and Sylvester Stewart. And he saw this dichotomy in Sly Stone as being this dark and evil predator and Sylvester Stewart as being this wise humanitarian strategist and that they were at odds with each other. That's interesting.

A lot of that book is informed by one Hamp Banks, Hamp de Bubba Banks. And Hamp was a pimp when Sly met him, and Sly was a young disc jockey, and he looked up to Hamp as a figure of repute in the community. And Hamp was amused by this snappy jive little disc jockey, and they became very powerful friends. Now, Hamp disappeared off the scene for a little while, came back, and Woodstock had happened. So Sly installed Hamp in this sort of administrative aide position or manager or whatever you call him. He moved his brother

out of the bedroom next to him and moved Hamp in. And from there on out, if you wanted to talk to Sly, you had to ask Hamp.

Now, Hamp became an incredible collaborator in this book. Nobody had ever talked to him or asked him, and he was most enthusiastic. He's an ex-Marine. He did his fair share of the same drugs, but he wasn't really as smitten by them as everybody else. And I've said this before, that a lot of the people that were in the band and that I interviewed, they were really like trauma victims. And Hamp wasn't a trauma victim. Hamp may have been a traumatizer. So he had a clear view on this in some ways. And also, here's the other thing. Sly grew up in the Seventh-day Adventist family. He was a goody-goody. He was very much raised in a bubble. He was protected. Yet he aspired to be one of the bad guys, to be one of the cool guys.

Back to high school. People all remember him from high school as being this guy who wanted to be but wasn't really. And as he got older and associated with Hamp and Hamp's associates, who are genuine criminal elements, bank robbers and all that kind of stuff, they had an expression, these guys, and Hamp introduced me to all of them. They were just wonderful cats. And what they would say was, he's not that guy. And what that means is, he isn't an authentic badass. He's not that guy. And they all knew that.

For instance, when I was mentioning the beating of the road crew at the Cavalier Motel, Hamp, Eddie Chin, JB, Black, and all their guys, they burst into the hotel room and they beat the crap out of these guys. They were using canes because they'd seen Clockwork Orange recently. And Sly came in and watched and then went over and slapped one of the guys a couple times. And then, so I did it, you know, I did it. And then he was gone. So I don't think that Eddie Chin thought too much of Sly. He told me that he cold cocked Sly once because he was just so stupid he couldn't stand it. And Eddie, in his colorful language, says, yeah, I slapped the taste out of his mouth.

How critical was getting to Hamp to getting other people to talk?

Hamp was the key that unlocked this whole story. And in fact, I changed the dedication of the book to Hamp for the republication. Hamp passed away last year. He was 83 years old. And I was one of the speakers at his funeral. There were 400 people. They paraded down Fillmore Street and stopped traffic for an hour. It was the sendoff for a king and a deserving one at that.

But I found Hamp and he'd never been contacted by anybody. And he came over to my house and was sitting in my office. And I've got a stack of CDs. And one of them is an English CD that collected a bunch of early Sly Stone tapes from the Autumn Records days. And most of them had never been released. And Hamp's looking over and he goes, oh, every dog has his day. That was always one of my favorites. And then he proceeds to recite the lyrics to an unreleased Sly Stone song from 1964. I thought, man, this cat is for real. And he was a truth teller of major proportions. Everybody knows that about Hamp. And he spent hours with me telling the stories over and over so that I knew what the accurate account was.

Then he went to bat going, you got to talk to this guy. Have you talked to Bobby Womack? I've been calling Womack for weeks. Let me call him. He calls Womack. He leaves a message on Womack's machine. He says, this is Bub. I'm here now. You call this guy. Forty minutes later, Womack calls. I don't even say any more than hello. And he starts talking. I mean, it was fantastic. I didn't even have to ask any questions. I eventually asked him, you know, when was the last time you saw Bub and why was he so responsive? He said, well, three or four years. But Bub always told me the truth. I'm like, you know, Dylan said to live outside the law, you must be honest. And Bub knew that.

So he collected all these guys for me: Eddie Chin, JB. I'm still in touch with JB. Black was already dead. But he'd call me and say, you know, you got to go over to the Hollywood chocolate potato chip factory at four o'clock. Eddie would be waiting for you. Who's Eddie? He goes, he'll tell you. And it really was very meaningful to him to first of all get his place in the story, and then second of all to have the story accurately reflect what happened. Because to him, it was the greatest waste that he'd ever been a part of in his life. That this guy had everything, and he compulsively, recklessly, just systematically destroyed it and threw it away. And Hamp did not respect that.

Did Hamp not think that he could have had any influence? I mean, it seems that everything went south, literally and figuratively, when they moved to Los Angeles and PCP comes in the story. It's unusual to have a rock story in which cocaine is not the worst drug, but here we get the PCP. Did Hamp ever try to slap some sense into Sly?

Well, I think that that was a little beyond the question. But I do remember that there was a point where Sly decided that everybody was going to go to rehab. And he told Hamp, you know, get it ready, he's going to take everybody to rehab. And Hamp gets everything ready, and then Sly says, well, maybe not everybody, maybe just Freddy. So Hamp takes Freddy to rehab, and Freddy, they're driving down the freeway, and Freddy's talking, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And Hamp's just had it. He's just listening to too much stupidity for too long. He pulls over to the side of the freeway and beats Freddy up in the front seat of the car and then takes him to rehab. Freddy, the Fredo of this story. Yeah, he is.

Did you try to interview Sly?

I don't think I did. He was kind of in the wind, and I really didn't care. He was the donut hole, and everybody else was the donut. And they knew exactly what the hole looked like. And I couldn't imagine what he could say to me besides, yeah, I did all that.

Oddly enough, sometime later, there were these lawyers that were financing a lawsuit on his behalf, and they had him in rehab, and they wanted to develop a post-rehab project for Sly. And they thought doing a book might be the thing to do. And they reached out to me and arranged for me to get a phone conference with Sly about the possibility of doing a book with him. And he was funny. He wanted to know if he could get $90,000 because he wanted to buy a recreational vehicle. First of all, $90,000 is not a very expensive recreational vehicle. But I assured him, absolutely, $90,000 from a book deal, no problem. And then he wanted to know, well, when do you get paid? When do you do the work, and when do you

get paid? You do the work first, you get money first, you get some money. How does it work? So I walked him through the payout, you know, this much when you sign, this much when you turn in the manuscript, this much when it's published. And he was like, okay. I didn't sense a great enthusiasm from him on the project, but about a week later, I got another phone call from him, and this one some girlfriend lined up, not the lawyer or anything. And he was on the phone a second time, and all he wants to know about now is how does that payout work again? So I got the sense that he really wasn't too serious about writing the book. He was serious about getting the book deal. It sort of fit with what I figured.

We're talking with Joel Selvin, his book is Sly and the Family Stone, an oral history. What do you find the most interesting part of the narrative?

It'd be hard to parse it like that. It's an incredible bell curve. The beginnings and the upside are just super exhilarating, wonderful ascension into the ranks of the Woodstock heroes. And Woodstock definitely is a pivot point where then it becomes like a matter of personal struggle, a real Daedalus and Icarus thing, actually.

Oddly enough, when Kaplick and Sly first came together to be partners and Sly and the Family Stone were signed to Epic Records, they started a publishing company called Daedalus Publishing. I didn't know Sly was a student of Greek mythology. Sly was a student of a lot of things,and David Kaplick was a pretty amazing character himself. He was sort of second in charge at Columbia Records for a long time. Signed Barbra Streisand, Andy Williams, took Bette Davis to the Broadway premiere of My Fair Lady. An amazing guy. And that he heard and saw what he did in Sly Stone is a tribute to his insight and his vision. But it was a tragic event for him in the long run. Three suicide attempts later, he just busted out of the whole music business and wound up growing onions and lilies on Maui.

The last thing I saw of David was just a few years ago. He was 93 years old and he was just about to leave this mortal coil. And he posed for a photograph in a tie-dyed caftan, laughing his ass off with his hand on his upturned casket. Go with style or don't go with all.

Did anybody's life get better for knowing and working with Sly?

It was largely a disaster. There were some survivors who prospered later in life, but it wasn't like the guys in the band. They've all really struggled to support themselves ever since. You know, Stephanie Swanigan was Sly's administrative assistant and paramour for a while. She wound up, you know, killing herself and going into politics and becoming a very important figure in administrative work in Sacramento. Johnny Cola from Huey Lewis and the News was in a post-Sly and the Family Stone Sly band for a little bit.

I don't know. Hard to say. I don't think so. I think that's an interesting question. And no, I don't think Sly really lifted up any of the people he was associated with. I think he exploited them, manipulated them and discarded them.

Three of the four books that we've talked about are about dysfunction and tragedy. What does that tell us about the music industry?

I'm not a happy ending guy. I mean, life doesn't have a happy ending. And it's sort of a Hollywood fantasy that stories have to have some kind of neat happy ending. I like gritty details. I like stories of adversity. And I don't mind coloring in the shadows. So yes, Sly Stone, Burt Burns, Hells Angels and Altamont, Jan Berry and those crazy guys in Hollywood. To me, it's like, you know, a kind of noir approach to rock history.

And we haven't had a chance to talk about it, but don't forget the mob and Peppermint Lounge.

Yeah, the whole Sopranos angle on Burt Burns is what's got Rob Reiner all jazzed about making a movie of it.

Is that going to happen?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. He's written a script. It's wonderful.

How much of the narrative did you know going in and were there things within the narrative that really surprised you to the point of shocking you?

The dog. Yeah, yeah. Look, I didn't really know what a nightmare it was. I knew it wasn't pretty. But my information was relegated to accounts from the members. And like so many people that recount traumatic events, they develop a kind of story around it and they stick to the story.

It wasn't until I met Hamp and started getting the details of the back story, what was happening around them. And then I came back to the band the next time and I'd say, well, Hamp says, and they'd go, oh, well, yeah, he told you about that. Oh, well, yeah, that did happen. So, yeah, I mean, I had no idea the depths of the whole thing and the dimensions of it. And as dark and dangerous and despairing as it was, I couldn't have imagined a vicious pit bull attacking his little baby son.

How was her affect when she told you that story?

That interview took place with Kathy Silva at about 10 in the morning in a Las Vegas casino. We were sitting in one of those little areas where they have raised for bar, a little cocktail lounge in the middle of the casino, and at 10 in the morning there weren't a lot of people around. And she was weeping openly, sobbing, you know, and it was a wrenching interview for both of us. I don't know why she felt free to unburden herself with me, but that was one of the most powerful emotional interviews of the whole thing. And there were a lot of people that were exploring memories that they had left sit for a long time with me. But yeah, Kathy Silva, that was wrenching.

And how did the baby eventually turn out?

Sly Jr., I think he's an audio engineer in Los Angeles. He was working around Sly's 2008 comeback. He was associated with that, doing some audio work around that. He's missing an ear.

Are there people who just wouldn't and couldn't talk to you?

Rose. Yeah. I met with Rose really early on when I just started and she was singing in Larry Graham's band. And I went backstage and hung out with her and she just couldn't have been more charming and more forthcoming. She's a lovely gal. And then I'd start making appointments to talk to her and, you know, it was getting more difficult. And finally we settled on a thing and I traveled down to Los Angeles. I took a suit and tie because she said we were going to go to church together. And the first meeting was to be in a restaurant. And I just sat there waiting for her and about 45 minutes after when she was supposed to show, she called the restaurant and said she couldn't come. And they told me and she would never answer my calls or say anything. But, I mean, I know what it was. She knew that I hooked up with Hamp. And she'd been married to Hamp.

And can I use foul language on this broadcast?

Well, I can always edit it out if it's too foul.

Well, what Hamp said was that Rose was so busy selling her at both sides of her drawers.

I think I'll need to clip that a little bit. You said a little while ago that you go back to people and they say, oh, Hamp said, and they tell you more of the story. Was it because they originally didn't remember at all or they originally figured, well, I'm not going to get into this because he's not going to know enough to ask about it?

Like I said, trauma victims have a way of developing a practiced story that makes it safe for them to recount. It assuages their harm feelings and their injuries. So that's just typical of trauma victims. And that just is not even a conscious thing. You just do that. So then you come back and say, well, what about this? And they go, oh. Like I remember Freddie. I said, well, Freddie, what about all the PCP? And Freddie says, oh, we didn't smoke no PCP. We smoked angel dust. Galaxy brain stuff there.

Did you explain to him?

No, you know, correcting people in interviews is always a mistake. Okay, okay, okay. I don't think about that, Stu. No, no, man, you got it wrong. I'll take that under advisement. Thank you.

We referred earlier to his concept of black and white girls and boys and everything. Some of his lyrics, especially everyday people, are imbued with this beautiful humanism. I mean, that's a beautiful song. Did he ever truly believe that or was it all a sham and a scam from the start?

Was that in his heart or just in his head is what you mean?

Yeah.

Because he understood it. The songs speak for themselves. And they contain those sentiments wholly and completely. So he understood them. Different strokes for different folks. Now, was that what he was about? Was that what was in his heart? What he was about, was that what was in his heart? You can't make that stuff up out of whole cloth. On the other hand, I believe there were a lot of hidden agendas operating with Sly, and that the

Sly and the Family Stone was a strategically constructed affair. You talk about the humanism of everyday people, and in fact, the whole Stand album is very much of a piece, of a philosophic piece, right? Don't call me f***er, Whitey. Stand, I want to take you higher. All these fit in with this everyday people concept of a garden of God's bouquet and humanitarian gestures and all that. Woodstock, flower child, generation stuff that he put his finger on so succinctly there.

Well, the next thing you know, it's like 18 months before the next album, which is an eternity in the pop music world, and the only thing that you hear from Sly after that is the number one single, Thank You for Letting Me Be Myself Again. So clearly we've moved from the humanistic to the narcissistic. Papa's still singing. You can make it every try. I want to thank you for letting me be myself again. Friends go, never uncoached. Thank you for letting me be myself again.

And the next thing we come up with is there's a riot going on, which is one of the most supremely dark visions of interpersonal relations that had ever been visited on the pop scene at that point. So you can see that whatever strategy, whatever infrastructure was behind the humanitarian material, it gave way to some kind of inner voice of Sly's that was probably as important as his music was in terms of creating a role model for Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye and people like that. You know, if Sly can reach down and deal with his innermost thoughts and his struggles and need for identity, then so can we. Thank you for letting me be myself again may only have one chord, but it has great lyrics. And I have to admit, it was not until this week that I learned the lyric was stiff all in the collar, not stickball in the parlor. Yeah, it's an amazing piece. And musically, it is one chord.

You referred earlier to Sly reciting Lord Buckley on the radio in the early 60s. There's a clip of Sly on the Dick Cavett show reciting part of The Naz. He was well versed in his Lordship. And one of the rabbit holes that the book sent me down, in addition to listening to all my old Sly albums and CDs, is watching these old clips of him on the Merv Griffin and the Dick Cavett show. And some of them, he's charming and pleasant and the performance is great. And part of them are just a train wreck. Can you talk a bit about the agony and the ecstasy of watching some of those old TV clips?

Well, the backstory on the second Cavett show is so extraordinary. I don't know how many pages it takes up in the book, but it's Byzantine. It starts out at Muhammad Ali's house in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. And then Sly slips away to the West Coast by himself because he's run out of drugs and he doesn't know where to score in New York. And now he's out in Los Angeles and everybody's in the East Coast and Hamp has to wrangle Bobby Womack to get Sly out to New York to do the Cavett show. I think Hamp said something like, you know, you know how much trouble I was in if I had to go to Bobby Womack. And then there's this whole scene at Butler Aviation where Sly and Womack get in the helicopter. and leave to go to the show and then come back. And Bub has to find him in the bathroom. I mean, it's just insane stuff. And they get on the set. And this is all, you can see this on YouTube.

And Cavett sees him across the set and says, ladies and gentlemen, Sly and the Family Stone. And Sly leans over to Hamp and says, Bubba got diarrhea and goes to the bathroom.

And Cavett's sitting there going, we'll be right back after. And they come back and Sly's on stage already, no introducing him. They didn't come back until he was in front of the camera. And they turned down. Thank you for letting me be myself again for like nine minutes. It's just absolutely one of the greatest performances by anybody I've ever seen on one of these talk shows.

And then he goes to talk to Cabot, right? And he's so high. He just trips on his way over to the couch. And he's got the little tea cozy pulled down over his head. And he's just giggling. Dick Cavett, Dick Cavett. And Cavett, who's already so pissed off, he can barely stand it. He's got like a stick up his rectum that's like this. And he's trying to conduct an interview. And Sly just keeps going, ah, Dick Cavett. That's all there too on YouTube, man. It's an unbelievable performance in both ways.

I'm afraid that is all the time we have for this broadcast version of my conversation with Joel Selvin about his book, Sly and the Family Stone, an oral history. But the conversation continues, and you can find that at wortfm.org.

We'll be broadcasting the ceremonies honoring the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at this time next week. Angela and Devin will be on the 23rd. I'll be back on the 30th for another musical conversation, this time with Brian Cramp about his book, This Band Has No Past, How Cheap Trick Became Cheap Trick.

Until then, on behalf of news and public affairs director Shali Pittman, engineer Andrew Thomas, and all of us here at Madison Book Beat, I'm Stu Levitan. Thank you for joining us. Now as Sly takes us out, please stay tuned for Alex Wilding-White and All Around Jazz. You're listening to WORT 89.9.